[Medieval Georgia]

THE PEOPLE AND THE POWER

565 endured under a bright sun among the wild and primitive
181 woodlands that has made their character what it is—which has given them their gay and brave fatality.

565 511 "The Poor People", says Chardin, "go almost naked: such is their misery not to be paralell'd; as not having anything to cover their Nakedness but a pitiful sorry Felt like to the Chlamys of the Ancients; into which they thrust their Heads, and turn which way they please as the Wind fits; for it covers but one side of their Bodies, and falls down no lower than their knees. . . .

"He that has a Shirt and a pair of pitiful Drawers thinks himself Rich: for almost all of 'em go Bare-Foot; and such of the Colchians who pretend to Shooes, have nothing but a piece of Buffalo's Hide, and that untann'd too; which piece of raw Hide is lac'd about their Feet with a Thong of the same: so that for all these sort of Sandals, their Feet are as durty, as if they went Bare-foot."

565 847 The respectable jeweller cannot understand the ragged gentlemen at all. He mentions:

"another most inhuman Tenent of theirs, that it is a piece of Charity to Murder Infants newly born, when they have not sufficient wherewith to maintain 'em; or such as are sick and past hopes of recovery. And the reason they give is this, that by so doing, they put those Children out of a great deal of misery, which they would undergo in a languishing Distemper, which in the end must of necessity carry 'em off. Such are the Arguments of these Barbarous People that have neither shame nor Humanity." [1]

[1] *Chardin* (1686 ed.), pp. 85–6.

CHAPTER V

Family

The family among the Georgian Highlanders represents an exogamous social unit which is patrilineal in descent, and patrilocal. 591

The form and composition of the family is not the same among the different groups of Georgian Highlanders. Among the Khevsurs, who leave the parental home at once after marriage, the family consists usually of a married couple and their children. Among the Pshavs, who are not partisans of division, the married brothers and their aged parents often live together, forming large families, which may be regarded as a remnant of the joint-family which was present in the whole Georgian Kingdom in time past. The same phenomenon is to be found also among the Svans, where individual brothers live together, forming a large homestead.

The father is the head of the family. In times past, the father was not only the head in the economic life of the family, but he was also its spiritual leader. The center of the home worship was the house hearth. The hearth and the iron chain suspended over it, called *sakideli*, and fire in general, were believed to be endowed with special supernatural power. On these beliefs are founded customs regarding fire as a cleansing and purifying agent, and the walking around the hearth during the wedding ceremony of the Pshavs.[1] The wife and children are subordinate to the father, obeying all his orders. His power and his rights over his children are manifested especially in the marriage procedures, where parental approval was necessary; most of the business of choosing the bride, matchmaking and bethrothal are accomplished by the parents without asking the consent of the young people. The power of the father is greater among the Svans than among the other groups of Georgian Highlanders. It is clearly expressed in the custom of infanticide which was practiced formerly in 593 [372] 593 [347]

[1] See Chapter VI, on Marriage.

6: Grigolia E-4, 5 (no date) 1939 RI1 Georgia RI1

Svanetia. In practicing this custom, the father had full right to kill his child or let it live, according to his own choice. Among the same Svans the father also had power in the matter of the inheritance rights of his son; he could delay and even deny his son his portion of the inheritance. However, his rights were not so absolute as those of the Roman *patria potestes*. Although the wife is subordinate to the husband, at the same time she has the right to possess her own capital, called *sathavno*, which is not under her husband's jurisdiction. This trait of the patriarchal family represents a usual occurrence among the peoples of the Near East.[2]

As we have just mentioned, the wife is subordinate to her husband, the performance of the work of the whole household is in her hands, and in many places she plays a prominent part in the field work. However, her personal safety[3] is guaranteed by her capital (*sathavno*), and in case she is endangered by her husband or his kin, she is protected by her kinsmen.

The relations between the married couple are regulated by special customs. Among the Khevsurs, a husband, with the exception of the first three days, sleeps apart from his wife. The upper story of the house represents the living place of the husband; the rest of the family remain on the first floor. For the conjugal nightly visits the wife climbs the primitive stairway leading to the room of her husband. Among the other groups of the Georgian Highlanders, such separation of the spouses is not practiced. Another particularity of the Khevsur married couple is the custom of avoidance of each other in public. Husband and wife try not to be seen together in public, at which time they act coldly toward each other, concealing their real affection. This custom was in use also among the Lowlanders of Georgia not very long ago.[4] It was considered a great insult to ask a Georgian about his family. Professor Kovalevsky[5] and other investigators of the Caucasus

---

[2] Koschaker: 215.
[3] See "Position of Woman."
[4] Koch: II, 290.
[5] Kovalevsky: a, I, 20.

6. Grigolia E-4, 5 (no date) 1939 RI1 Georgia RI1

followers does not represent at all the survival of the supposed former bloody encounters between the ravisher and his party and the bride's kinsmen, which the author thinks took place when the "custom" of marriage was by capture; but it may have a purely religio-magical explanation, like the customary firings of guns used by the Georgians at the time of childbirth, upon the married couple's departure from the church and after the wedding, and on the dawn of the first day of a new year; while the same explanation applies to the custom of firing guns during an eclipse of the sun.

If the economic conditions and the rigorous struggle for existence, as mentioned above, compel the Khevsurs to limit artificially the number of their children, the same conditions compel the Svans to take more drastic steps than the practice of abortion in controlling the birth rate, to practice the infanticide.

Among the Svans, as among the Khevsurs, the young people are engaged to marry in their early childhood, and there are even cases when the engagement takes place before the birth of the couple, when two friendly families decide to intermarry their children before they are born, in order to strengthen their amicable relations. All the necessary arrangements for the marriage are made by the parents of the young people, whose personal feelings are totally ignored.

The first step in the marriage is the match-making, when the parents of the bride receive from the parents of the groom one ruble or a bullet as a token of agreement. Later the betrothal is performed, consisting of the payment of two sheep or an ox or a cow, and is called *nakdanur*. After the *nakdanur* is given, before the wedding, the groom is obliged to pay for his future wife the special bride-price, called *nachvlash*. The *nachvlash* is paid by the groom himself or by his parents. His kinsmen do not assist him, as is the case among the other groups of Georgian Highlanders. The *nachvlash* consists, among the common people, of from 100 to 200 rubles, and among the upper class—the nobility, called *aznauri*—the bride-price is twice as large, i. e., 200 to 400 rubles. According to the data furnished by Margiani,[18] the amount of the

[18] Margiani: 76.

6: Grigolia E-4, 5 (no date) 1939. RI1 Georgia RI1
Svan

nachvlash by the commoners reached 120 rubles, and among the *aznauri*, 240 rubles. Although the payment of the *nachvlash* was forbidden by the authorities in 1885, it did not cease to be practiced by the people.

In spite of the existence of the obligatory payment of the bride-price by the Svan groom, we cannot consider this practice as marriage by purchase, because of the large amount of dowry given to the bride by her relatives.

After the payment of the *nakdanur* and the *nachvlash*, the bride is regarded as belonging to the groom. In case of her desertion or the breaking of their word by the bride's parents, the result is a blood feud or the return of everything given to the bride in addition to the payment of indemnity. Thus marriage among the Svans, as among the other Georgian Highlanders, has the character of a legal business transaction—a contract.

The dowry (*mzithvi*) which the bride brings to the home of her husband, usually exceeds the bride-price. The dowry is formed usually of cattle (cows, horses, sheep), large copper cooking pots, clothing and adornments for the bride such as ear-rings, beads, rings, etc. Land is given as a dowry only when the bride-price (*nachvlash*) is paid by the groom in land. In addition to the dowry, the bride brings with her two oxen-loads of bread and brandy for the relatives of the groom.

Considering the large amount of dowry and the additional expense necessary for the marriage ceremonies which falls heavily upon the bride's family, it is not difficult to understand the current opinion among the Svans that a woman is a source of great expense and material loss for the entire family. This fact, together with the economic conditions of the country, may be were responsible for the practice of infanticide by the Svans, when newborn baby girls were put to death.

The reason for the preference given to boys over girls as expressed in the custom of infanticide is not difficult to comprehend if, in addition to the facts stated above, one takes into consideration the structure of the social organization where every male member is not only the defender of the material and moral interests of the family but is also the sustainer of its physical existence and the

6: Grigolia E-4, 5 (no date) 1939 RI1 Georgia RI1

guaranty of its propagation. The son is also the caretaker and guardian of the ancestor-worship—the cult of the dead, upon whose good will is believed to depend the well-being and the very existence of the family. Accordingly, the father sees in his son not only the supporter in his lifetime but also the guarantor of the peaceful rest of his soul after death.

Besides the economic causes, Professor M. Kovalevsky[16] sees also the influence of socio-political factors responsible for the custom of infanticide, especially in the Princely Svanetia. The inhabitants of this part of the country convinced the author that the subordinate position of the common people and the power of the ruling princes, *Dadeshkeliani*, to seize and put into service or sell into slavery every girl of common birth, was the main reason for the existence of the custom of infanticide in the Princely Svanetia. On the other hand, the people in Free Svanetia blamed the difficult economic conditions as the sole cause of the custom.

Although the girl was put to death soon after her birth, the birth of a boy, on the contrary, was the occasion of joy and special celebration.

There were different ways of putting the children to death, such as choking them with hot ashes, strangulation, placing a stone on the stomach, starving them to death by leaving them without any food.[17]

The investigators and travelers who visited the country of the Svans report the existence of infanticide among them and discuss it, expressing their opinions concerning the possible causes of this custom.

Thus the Frenchman, Raphael Bernoville, sees the cause of the custom in economic conditions, the absence in the family of the means to feed and raise the girls. As to the manner of putting the babies to death, he mentions the practice of choking them with ashes. He writes concerning the subject:[18] "Les femmes étant considerées par eux comme des bouches inutiles, lorsque les naissances excédaient le nombre utile des membres de la famille

---

[16] Kovalevsky: a, II, 41-4.
[17] Stoianov: 435.
[18] Bernoville: 103.

6: Grigolia E-4, 5 (no date) 1939 RI1 Georgia RI1

on étouffait sans cérémonie les filles en leur jetant dans la gorge une pincée de cendres."

The Russian investigator, I. A. Bartolomei,[19] relates that during his visit to the country the Svans of the community of Kali were proudly showing him little girls and boasted that they allowed them to live and did not kill them as they used to do in times past. "But in spite of this grace shown toward the female sex," adds Mr. Bartolomei, "I noticed that many of the inhabitants were carefully holding boys in their arms and nursing them with tenderness."

"Formerly the newly-born baby girls were put to death in Svanetia," writes D. Margiani concerning the same subject, and adds: "This custom was widely spread in Svanetia."[20]

The Georgian scientist, D. Z. Bakradze,[21] discusses at length the practice of infanticide by the Svans and regards the current opinion of poverty as the cause of the custom as a false notion. The only explanation, he thinks, is the "inclination of the Svans, like all uncivilized people, to give the preference to babies of the male sex." This statement, given without any justification for the cause of "inclination," cannot be taken as proof, but, on the contrary, it should be mentioned again that the existence of the preference of boys over girls in the Svan communities has no mystical or philosophic foundation, but is purely of economic origin. Besides this point, the information furnished by Mr. Bakradze has many interesting details dealing with the custom. "The number of women in Svanetia," writes Mr. Bakradze, "is considerably smaller than that of men, which is explained by the abominable custom of killing the newly-born girls. Formerly this custom was observed throughout Svanetia. In the house where I passed the night a few years ago, five girls had been put to death. This custom has already fallen into desuetude in Princely Svanetia, and is gradually disappearing in Free Svanetia, thanks to the efforts of the authorities. The opinion prevails among us that the killing of babies was carried

[19] Bartolomei: 150.
[20] Margiani: 75.
[21] Bakradze: 45.

6: Grigolia E-4, 5 (no date) 1939 RI1 Georgia RI1

847 out by pouring hot ashes into their mouths; but I heard from the Svans themselves that this notion is wrong and that the girls were merely starved to death by leaving them without any food. It is generally believed that the motive for this custom lies in the poverty of the people. But this also is incorrect," adds the author, "because this custom was observed not only by poor people but among the nobility as well. The custom of killing the baby girls is explainable far more simply through the inclination, as among all uncivilized people, to give preference to babies of the male sex." We have already expressed our view as to the unacceptability of the author's opinion set forth in the latter part of the above quotation. However, it should be noted that in Free Svanetia no drastic economic distinction existed between the common people and the nobility. The members of the noble class were almost as poor as the common people; their titles did not signify material wealth. Therefore, adverse economic conditions forced them to follow the example of the lower classes in the practice of infanticide.

565

162 I. A. Bartolomei confirms the foregoing statement in the 565 following words:[22] "In the whole of Free Svanetia there is not

162 DISTRIBUTION OF THE POPULATION IN THE COMMUNITIES OF FREE SVANETIA IN 1887*

Communities	*Homes*	*Both Sexes*	*Males*	*Females*
Ushkul	75	526	284	242
Kali	64	425	236	189
Ipari	133	1027	568	459
Etseri	176	1365	750	415
Pari	80	664	350	314
Lendjeri	71	669	351	318
Chubukhevi	116	996	516	480
Becho	89	704	371	333
Latali	122	994	504	490
Mulakhi	153	1303	702	601
Mestia	102	860	467	493
Total	1181	9533	5099	4334

162 one prince. In this democratic country the nobility retained only 565 the right to dine once a year with the descendants of their former

[22] Bartolomei: 170.
*From V. J. Teptsov: "Svanetia," Table No. 8, P. 45.

[see cat. 116, p 4 - - Analyst]

6: Grigolia E-4, 5 (no date) 1939 RI1 Georgia RI1

peasant subjects, and in the case of blood feuds, such as the *wergild,* the amount of two 'bloods' was paid for the murder of one nobleman."

On the other hand, the custom of infanticide is responsible for the smaller number of women than men in Svan communities, as Mr. Bakradze justly remarks. The Russian investigators, N. Dmitriev and V. J. Teptsov, endorse the above statement with statistical data.

In reference to statistical data, it is necessary to note that the peoples of the Caucasus have always shown a mistrust to any kind of census conducted by the Russian government, suspecting only trouble for themselves, such as being drafted into military service, compulsory labor or new taxes. But in spite of this fact, the numbers furnished in the statistical data accumulated by the Russian government, if even approximate and inexact, are helpful in elucidating the matter under discussion.

The statistical tables given by N. Dmitriev and V. J. Teptsov show clearly the differences in the numbers of the sexes composing the population of the country.

The data furnished by Mr. Teptsov[23] were taken from the governmental statistical committee of Kutais, as the author remarks in the introduction of his work.

THE POPULATION IN THE COMMUNITY OF FREE SVANETIA IN 1887*

Communities										
Ushkul	117	28	28	69	101	50	8	16	175	7
Kali	83	14	13	79	96	48	9	9	131	1
Ipari	223	30	44	157	245	83	15	17	308	11
Etseri	269	66	58	222	334	118	22	29	394	17
Pari	113	28	40	133	154	57	5	26	191	6
Lendjeri	151	21	24	122	138	43	17	21	198	4
Chubukhevi	182	38	71	189	294	92	14	18	278	11
Becho	123	29	48	135	163	65	14	20	194	8
Latali	201	35	65	189	220	63	12	20	272	10
Mulakhi	259	60	7	185	307	98	23	38	372	11
Mestia	157	20	55	161	228	61	34	21	205	5
Total	1878	369	546	1641	2208	778	173	235	2718	91
On 1,000 souls of population	197.0	38.7	57.2	172.1	231.6	81.6	18.1	24.6	285.2	9.5

[23] Teptsov: Svanetia.
*From V. J. Teptsov: "Svanetia" (1887), Table No. 10, p. 51.

6: Grigolia E-4, 5 (no date) 1939 RI1 Georgia RI1

among the Svans," writes Mr. Bartolomei,[26] "in the present state of decline of Christianity, bears evidence of the hopes which are placed in the sons and the constant care shown them by their fathers. The ceremony itself consists of the father throwing two bullets into the crib of the new-born son, one for himself and the other for the baby. These two bullets express the ties with which father and son are bound. In his son the father sees not only the preserver of his family but also a helper in the blood-feud whenever his honor is molested, and vengeance is more important to him than his very life."

Disagreeing with the author in describing this custom as a form of baptism, we admit that the Svan father, in throwing two bullets into the crib, considers one for himself and the other for his son. These two bullets are believed to express the beginning of close ties uniting the father and son. In his son the father sees a helper and defender of their common interests in blood-feuds. So this custom represents neither a degeneration of the Christian custom of baptism nor the mere "comedie," as M. Bernoville thinks. Nor has it any other religious meaning; its sole purpose and intention is entirely practical and vital. By this custom the father and son are bound together for life, to safeguard each other and their family. This Svan custom is similar to the exchange of bullets in the adoption ceremony practiced by the Khevsurs.[27]

Created by living conditions and having a rational basis, the custom of infanticide has been given a superstitious interpretation by the people. Thus the Svans believe that for every girl killed God will send the parents a son. "Through their wild superstition the Svans are convinced," writes the Georgian investigator, D. Z. Bakradze,[28] "that the murder of a daughter is rewarded with the birth of a son." This statement is confirmed by D. Margiani.[29] "The Svan women," he writes, "believed that for killing girls they

---

[26] Bartolomei: 160.
[27] See "Adoption."
[28] Bakradze: 42.
[29] Margiani: 75.

6: Grigolia E-4, 5 (no date) 1939 RI1 Georgia RI1

were rewarded by God with the birth of babies of the male sex as the answer to their prayers . . ."

The practice of infanticide was also responsible for the custom of marriage by abduction, practiced by the Svans. By putting to death the baby girls, there was a consequent shortage of marriageable women. The tables of statistics given above clearly indicate the acuteness of the situation. Thus the table furnished by N. Dmitriev[3] dealing with the distribution of the population in the communities of Free Svanetia shows that of the total population of 5,801, there are 3,116 males and 2,685 females, which makes 431 fewer women than men. We find the same situation when we consult the tables prepared by V. J. Teptsov. In consequence of this situation the men were obliged to resort to kidnaping and abduction in order to obtain a mate. I. A. Bartolomei and D. Z. Bakradze justly observe that infanticide is responsible for the custom of bride-stealing and abduction. Relating the gradual abandonment by the Svans of the practice of infanticide, Mr. Bartolomei adds:[30] "They told me it would not be necessary for our sons to buy or steal wives for themselves beyond the mountains." D. Z. Bakradze[31] expresses the same opinion. "The result of this custom," he writes, referring to infanticide, "was a diminution in the number of women and the consequent necessity for bride-abduction and the kidnaping of the wives of other men."

The result of the kidnaping of a woman among the Svans was a blood-feud (*litskup*) with all its grave results; or, if an agreement was reached, the payment of indemnity by the abductor consisting of half the amount of the blood-money, called *tsor*, to remove the dishonor, and in addition the usual bride-price (*nachvlash*) in full. On the other hand, when a Svan stole a woman from a neighboring tribe, he was not prosecuted and his action was not even viewed as a crime.

The bride-stealing—marriage by capture—was practiced not only by the Svans but also by all other groups of the Georgian Highlanders and by the Georgians of the Lowlands as well.

---

[30] Bartolomei: 160.
[31] Bakradze: 46.

[3] [see cat. no. p84--Analyst]